

What is Chicago planning? Not nearly enough

By Greg Hinz April 27, 2013

Is good planning in Chicago as dead as Daniel Burnham?

That's the question effectively posed in a provocative new book by two veteran Chicago observers at Roosevelt University, [D. Bradford Hunt](#) and [Jon DeVries](#). They cover a lot of territory. Mostly, they are right.

Their hypothesis in "Planning Chicago" is that a city that in many ways invented American urban planning and gained mightily from that experience has lost its mojo, dragged down by high debt levels, politics and a tax-increment financing beast that has become the proverbial tail wagging the Chicago dog.

"Financing sources have driven choices and decisions," the two conclude in the book. "When financing drives planning, rather than the other way around, decisions are made on a deal-by-deal basis that serves the needs of political actors more than the general public."

As Chicago Plan Commission Chairman Reuben Hedlund is quoted as saying, referring to the Richard M. Daley years: "Comprehensive plans (have) given way to incremental efforts, one planned development at a time."

Mr. DeVries in particular is concerned about the city's failure to improve public transit much in recent decades. The director of Roosevelt's Bennett Institute of Real Estate, he knows a fair amount about that subject, having worked on and off for decades as a city consultant.

The downtown circulator system designed to move commuters from West Loop railroad stations to Michigan Avenue and other points east died in the '90s, Mr. DeVries points out; a West Loop transportation center intended to allow further expansion of downtown's office district is moribund; and hopes of extending the Chicago Transit Authority's Red Line south have been delayed in favor of far more limited initiatives like the [budding Bus Rapid Transit network](#).

CTA President Forrest Claypool responds that the CTA is boosting its capacity by spending big bucks on equipment and repairing slow zones. Still, he concedes, "I'm not defending transportation planning by any stretch; it's been poor."

The book also targets World Business Chicago, the city's economic development agency. Mayor Rahm Emanuel has sought to revitalize it, but "corporate recruitment" is a tactic, not a strategy, the authors say, and WBC's bigger plans mostly leave follow-up "unaddressed."

WBC Co-chairman Michael Sacks disputes that, saying the group has a more focused model and has brought in a dozen staffers to work with McKinsey & Co. and Washington's Brookings Institution on implementation. Similarly, Andy Mooney, commissioner of the city's Department of Housing and Economic Development, notes that the Emanuel administration has begun pouring capital into areas like the McCormick Place district to leverage [favorable trends](#) and is integrating TIF projects with the city's overall budget.

But notably, Mr. Mooney's department doesn't even have "planning" in its name anymore. Mr. Mooney has had to spend much of his capital trying to rebuild a staff decimated by waves of budget-cutting.

The authors are not always critical. Roosevelt Road grew as a big-box row for the greater South Side because the city planned for it, they say. And Millennium Park has turned into an enormous anchor for the East Loop. Others say Mr. Daley did have a plan, even if he didn't put it to paper. One item in it: modernizing O'Hare International Airport.

MarySue Barrett, president of the Metropolitan Planning Council, says planning at the regional level has blossomed lately with groups such as the Chicago Metropolitan Agency for Planning. In Chicago itself, she adds, "The answer is mixed. The important thing isn't whether you have plans but whether you're using them to move

forward.”

Messrs. DeVries and Hunt are not satisfied.

Chicago once planned things like transit lines in expressways and has an exploding downtown residential area because over the decades city planners made it a priority, Mr. Hunt says. “The culture of the city in terms of planning is nowhere near where it used to be.”

The point has merit. Hopefully, their book will set off some needed debate.

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